

Below is Congressman Pence's opening statement from yesterday's Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee Hearing for Jewish and Palestinian refugees:

*Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing and welcome to our distinguished witnesses. These are complex and challenging issues. One element of complexity is that the number of Palestinian Refugees is hotly disputed—ranging somewhere between 520,000 and 900,000. Indeed, stating the matter as “two Sides of the Same Coin” is itself controversial.*

*I would argue that the historical record is clear on at least one matter: Jewish Refugees in Arab countries often faced execution, pogroms, bombings, torture, forced exile, and, nearly universally, confiscation of property, often solely for the alleged crime of “Zionism,” if not merely existing. There really is no comparison with that as to what faced Palestinian Refugees.*

*While I have compassion for the plight of the Palestinian people, their situation rests squarely with their leadership and, to a lesser extent, the leaders of the Arab world. The Palestinian leadership's intransigence and unwillingness to keep its many commitments have left its people in hostility with their Jewish neighbors.*

*Further, the utter pittance that Arab states have contributed to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) would be laughable if it weren't so tragic. Most Arab states have treated the Palestinians as pawns, denying them any number of rights. The Palestinians have been served so poorly by the leaders and by their ostensible allies and so an entire people have suffered for more than half a century now.*

*Mr. Chairman, in addition to the larger refugee question, I am gravely concerned about the protection of Palestinian Christian communities, notably in Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem. Palestinian Christians comprise 2% of the population, down from 8-10% of a few decades ago. I am troubled by this quasi-“ethnic scouring.” According to the 2006 Religious Freedom Report from our Department of State, the Palestinian Authority failed to halt several cases of seizures of Christian-owned land in the Bethlehem area by criminal gangs, and PA security forces and judicial officials reportedly colluded with members of these gangs to seize land from Christians in recent years. One might conclude that modern militant Islam, in any number of manifestations, is a threat to a multi-confessional society.*

*Many of these churches and communities trace their lineage back to the time of Christ 2000 years ago. Yet, today, they are not a favored group in the least by the Hamas-led government. This is outrageous and tragic.*

*Mr. Chairman, complicated questions about the right of return, the final status of various groups, and the disposal of perhaps billions of dollars worth of Jewish property confiscated—these matters are complex and will probably be negotiated for the entire 21st century.*

*But a simple straightforward step to alleviating misery is within the grasp of the Palestinian leadership: recognizing Israel's right to exist and renouncing violence is all that stands in the way of a two state solution and, most likely, a massive flow of aid to the Palestinian territory. Certainly its leaders can do that, if nothing else, to help their own people.*

*Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.*